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AUTHOR Butler, Sydney J.; Bentley, T. Roy
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ABSTRACT

Lifewriting is a form of autobiographical composition in which the non-expert, or even the beginning writer, tries to capture on paper the raw experiences of a lifetime. The intersections between family history and social or political events provide one set of starting points for the lifewriter who sets out on the neverending journey to capture a life in words. The focus on topics of deep personal interest and a process approach to writing in the supporting environment of a lifewriting group make even the first attempts worthwhile. The initial emphasis of a writing "induction" program on lifewriting is on the participants' experiences, on talking about the experiences with others, and on responding to the questions of the other members of the group as a means to clarify and shape the experience, to give it a beginning and an ending suitable for a story form. Use of the word "induction" instead of instruction can give the leader of a writing group a greater vision of the task, which evolves around three dicta: start, sustain, and propagate. "Start" refers to work on idea-generation and motivation. "Sustain" provides continuing encouragement in the production of artifacts. "Propagate" builds in follow-up activities and resources. The entire process gradually evolves into the joy of self-expression and authorship. (KEH)

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LIFEWRITING

Literacy and Self-Awareness Through Autobiographical Writing

by

Sydney J. Butler and T. Roy Bentley

Dr. Butler and Dr. Bentley both teach in the Language Education Department of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, B.C., Canada V6T 1W5.

Since forming The Lifewriting Project some five years ago, they have presented lifewriting sessions for the Centre for Continuing Education and the Adult Education Department at UBC. In addition to their conference presentations and papers in professional journals, they have also published *Lifewriting; Self-Exploration and Life Review Through Writing* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1988), *Writing Life Stories* (Vancouver: Centre for Continuing Education, 1988), and *Lifewriting; Visions and Reflections* (Vancouver: Centre for Continuing Education, 1989).

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Lifewriting: Literacy and Self-Awareness Through Autobiographical Writing

WHY LIFEWRITING?

Lifewriting for many people comes to be "life-righting," when they put things to right in their own minds. The can rearrange past events, re-interpret present happenings, and imagine future developments. But in the programmes we have been teaching our aim has been primarily to encourage people to put pen to paper; the other effects and results stem from this original goal. The stories and poems which we have published in our anthologies of lifewriting demonstrate the variety of explorations and excursions that occur when the power of the pen opens the mind to the possibilities of the past, present, and future. These anthologies show very delightfully, not only the participants' developing fluency and skill in writing, but also their understanding and enlightenment about the personal human situation.

More than ever, the stories and poems in our collections illustrate that writing is a way of knowing, and that lifewriting is a way by which the writers learn more about the meaning and value of their life experiences. As the poet, C. Day Lewis said: "We do not write in order to be understood; we write to understand."

WHAT IS LIFEWRITING?

To define lifewriting simply as autobiographical composition would be to ignore the potential variety of modes and forms of writing available to the beginning lifewriter. Lifewriting, of course, is autobiography. But it is also much more, or much less, depending on whether you

compare it by a standard of comprehensiveness or by its diversity. The standard, formal autobiography is more usually the preserve of the expert writer, or at least the person who has achieved fame and fortune, and now has the time, money, and possibly the help of an expert editor or ghost writer to give shape and substance to a life in the expectation that an eager public will be ready to pay to read the inside story of a well-known figure.

Lifewriting, on the other hand, is for the non-expert or even the beginning writer, perhaps a person whose most sustained writing has been in the pages of a personal letter or journal. In fact, both of these writing forms, the letter and the journal, provide a good basis for the deeper explorations of lifewriting, but as lifewriting stories so clearly demonstrate, the possibilities for self-enlightenment and understanding are as much for the writer as delight and entertainment for the reader.

Few ordinary people, and certainly only very rarely a developing writer, have the resources to sustain the effort needed to complete the record of a whole life. Indeed, the sheer enormity of the task makes it almost impossible to begin. We have all lived so many years, travelled or visited so many places, shifted in our interests in so many hobbies and pastimes, and have been involved emotionally with so many people that even to consider trying to capture all that raw experience on paper is completely overwhelming. There is so much that could be written that the doubts will inevitable persist: "Will I be able to remember all the details, the dates, places, names, events? Will it be worth writing? Will it be worth reading? Why should I bore readers with pages of incidents and recollections which are important only to me?" And in attempting an autobiography, there is always the underlying fear that it can never be complete because you do not know the full story of your life, that you cannot explain all of the incidents or your motives for your actions. And the final doubt that saps at the will to write is whether your self-portrait will be true to life, whether you will have the courage and honesty to show your self in all its aspects--a complete figure, warts and all.

FAMILY HISTORY

As an alternative to the fully-fledged autobiography, lifewriting presents the possibility of a family or personal history, which in a world of frequent travel, migration, divorce, and generation gaps would seem to have some obvious value in allowing the children of the next generation to understand their roots and antecedents. Yet the doubt still persists whether what we have to offer will interest our sons and daughters. Surely they want to know about grandparents and great grandparents, about life in the old days of horse-drawn buggies and kerosene lamps, of life on a Depression homestead or in the Flanders trenches. Why would life in a modern city, even if it did pre-date television and shopping malls, seem to hold any romantic interest for the young reader?

Yet what might seem very mundane about our own pasts could appear strange to the next generation. Perhaps our stories of the family grouped around the wooden cabinet of a radio to listen to the weekly episode of a comedy show will appear as foreign as those Victorian scenes of the family grouped around the piano in the front parlour. Perhaps our stories of watching plays broadcast live to our grainy black-and-white television sets, complete with rabbit-ear antennae, will sound as antiquated as looking at photos through a wooden stereoscope viewer. How do we know what aspects of our lives will fascinate our future readers?

Obviously we cannot know, but we can be sure that if we can preserve something of our lives for posterity, then there will be some readers who will find interest in how their ancestors lived through the middle decades of the twentieth century. In the fifties the question was asked: "What did you do in the war, daddy?" Perhaps it is too late for most of us to answer that question in our lifewriting stories. But now the question is: "Why didn't you go to Woodstock?" Or, of course, many of us could tell the story of how we heard of Kennedy's assassination, or how we spent VE night, just as an earlier generation could tell of putting out the gas lamps in the street when the

Zeppelin roared overhead.

BEGINNING LIFEWRITING

The intersections between family history and social or political events provide one set of starting points for the lifewriter who sets out on the never-ending journey to capture a life in words. Many lifewriters begin with the expectation that they are going to simply record what they already know. But the lesson taught by research into the processes of written composition, reinforced by the statements of experienced writers, is that writers will inevitably write more than they know. The process of writing is a process of exploration, during which the writers discover that they can write what they had not known at the beginning. The act of writing itself is a heuristic, or idea-generating technique. So that when writers focus on topics of deep personal interest, they are able to recover far more detail than they were ever conscious of. "Detail," said Joseph Conrad, in talking about writing, "detail is everything." But Conrad had to be physically chained to his desk to do his morning's stint of writing. What makes the lifewriter sustain an interest in the process of re-creating a life on paper?

First, there is the guarantee of success for every writer in the implementation of a process approach to writing in the supporting environment of the lifewriting group. Even in the first session there is the expectation that every writer will be able to generate a story, to test its value by talking to other lifewriters about the experience, and then jot down enough detail to ensure that it will be possible to shape the story into an acceptable format. The emphasis at this point is on the experience itself, on talking about the experience to others, and on responding to the questions of the other members of the group as a means to clarify and shape the experience, to give it a beginning and an ending suitable for a story form.

By the end of a first lifewriting session, the beginning lifewriter will have experienced the joy of talking about an experience and remembering far more than would have seemed possible. Here is the initial vision which motivates the beginning writer to sustain the effort, and later to use the process of reflection to add more details in order to shape the experience into a readable form.

SELF-EXPRESSION AND CREATIVITY

There is also the joy of self-expression involved in this process, because the writer is becoming involved in the subject that is closest to the writer's heart--the self. Bishop Mahoney, in an address to teachers, said: "Human beings live to express themselves," and the lifewriting group provides the forum for its members to express themselves both in talking and writing. In the same speech the Bishop also said: "You only become conscious of your value when people listen to you." So, the other aspect of the lifewriting group is the collaborative structure which enables partners to listen to each others' stories and to offer helpful comments and questions.

Along with the joy of remembering goes the joy of creating, because the process of writing ensures that every beginning writer will have the editorial help which will enable the story to achieve a form worthy of preservation, if not publication. When raw experience becomes shaped into language, amplified through the exploration and discovery provided by the writing process until it achieves a readable form, then the lifewriter is already well on the way to becoming an author. The artefact which is produced, the hard copy, is proof of success as a writer. And if the lifewriter has produced one story, then the possibility exists to produce other stories, and repeat the process to re-create other experiences and to trace other themes.

Although the ostensible motivation for joining a lifewriting group may be the desire to preserve something of a personal past for posterity, the achievement of this goal at any level will mean that the lifewriter experiences the intangible rewards of authorship, and these are the forces

which will help to sustain the writer through the struggle to capture and express more life experiences. Moreover, the social force of the group process which ensures that every lifewriter is a partner in the others' struggles towards authorship is the fuel which powers the writing process.

Nevertheless, this emphasis on the telling of stories may make the lifewriting group seem like a simple gossip shop. Nostalgia, however, is not what it used to be. In the past the field of psychology viewed such garrulous reminiscences as a sign of mental dysfunction in the elderly, whose preoccupation with past memories seemed to show they were incapable of dealing with the present. Such forms of life-storying were seen as aimless wanderings of the mind. Only in the last three decades has this process of life review been seen to have a positive effect. Robert Butler (1963) in a seminal article in *Psychiatry* (26:65-76), entitled "The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged," redefined life review to show the benefits of the reintegration of life experiences as a natural process:

> As the past marches in review, it is surveyed, observed, and reflected upon by the ego. Reconsideration of previous experiences and their meanings occurs, often with concomitant revised or expanded understanding. Such reorganization of past experience may provide a more valid picture, giving new and significant meaning to one's life.

Butler's views were the result of his clinical practice with elderly people. On the other hand, our experience with lifewriting groups with people of all ages suggests that the positive effects of writing life stories may be a more universal phenomenon, and that anyone can experience beneficial effects from this process of life review. As we said in our text, *Lifewriting: Self-Exploration and Life Review Through Writing* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1988):

> Quite quickly, for most people--whatever the reason why they start lifewriting--the attempt to recapture the past becomes not only interesting but also rewarding as they begin to find certain shape and order in their lives, as they begin to speculate on what made them what they are. At the deepest level, they begin to find patterns and purposes and meaning to life. Along with this realization many discover that they can transfer angers and hates and joys to paper--they write the demons out, settle old scores, come to terms with old griefs, and by so doing they begin to feel that they can more easily cope with them. Indeed, someone once said that the paper they write on becomes the blotter to soak up powerful emotions.

The stories and poems in our collections show that lifewriting gives people the vision to see the themes and patterns of their lives embodied in the incidents and experiences they recall. Above all, the process of formulating these experiences into a literary shape enables the lifewriter to discover the meanings of these experiences and to give value to the people and events of their lives.

TEACHING LIFEWRITING

We believe that teachers of writing might gain a better perception of what they are engaged in if they regarded their courses as part of a Writing Induction program rather than a Writing Instruction program. There are certainly strong elements of inducement currently in many writing programs in the motivation activities, for instance, in pre-writing, and in publication

opportunities; however, we construe induction not as a part embedded in a program, but rather as the groundwork to the total program.

Before looking at the induction approach, let us scrutinize some of our current beliefs about the participants in our classes. If we are in a public school situation, we meet people who are not there by choice. They might never have thought about writing as anything other than a school activity--an occasional task that is to be endured because of its difficulty and drudgery. They are not particularly interested anyway in learning to write, in practising writing, or becoming proficient in writing. And there are some who are not even willing to be engaged in such activity.

Although they are usually volunteers, many of the people who attend an adult lifewriting course bring these same attitudes with them. They may very well feel that writing is primarily a school activity and it is the business of the teacher to instruct them how to do it. They may also think that it is the business of the teacher to assign topics, set deadlines, and mark, correct, or grade the incoming writings.

If we are truly committed to a literate society, we must come to grips with these attitudes; it is not enough to work only with the motivated, cooperative and enthusiastic students and feel that we have done the job, unless, of course, we are willing to accept less than a five per cent success rate. The problem often cited is that students--and society--do not value writing, in an age of the telephone, interactive television, and face-to-face handling of routine matters. On the other hand, there are also favourable changes, the ubiquity of the fax machine, the increasing disappearance of the secretary (with the "She'll put my ideas in order and stick in the commas and things" attitude to writing), and the popularity of such things as compiling lists for stress reduction, problem definition, and life-ordering. It is when we become concerned about the total group that the idea of induction becomes important.

WRITING INDUCTION

The word "induction" contains first not only the matter of inducement, providing motivation and persuasion, and also--equally important--incentives and motives. Secondly it brings in a cluster of images of electricity, the generation of force in a closed circuit by application of a varying magnetic flux, and the charging of an isolated object by grounding it with charged objects nearby, all pertinent to the influence of the leader and to the effects of group activities. Further, the word also contains the whole idea of being inducted, initiated or admitted to a special body. These perspectives, elicited by the use of the word "induction," give the leader of a writing group a greater vision of the task, which we see evolving around three dicta: START, SUSTAIN, PROPAGATE.

This approach has been developed in field research with our lifewriting groups, but we believe that it is just as desirable for use in general school or college situations. Lifewriting participants, after all, are attending the class voluntarily, motivated by a desire to learn how to write or get started on writing. But even with these lifewriters the Start, Sustain, Propagate approach is not only remarkably effective but also almost a necessity for most of them if they are to continue writing.

START

The START element seems obvious. It is a time and place to work on idea-generation and motivation. But we have found that it is important to go far beyond these into the matter of creating incentives (time-trials, self-discovery items, tit-for-tat sharing, etc.) and helping the participants discover motives for specific *essais*. With the lifewriting groups, the initial focus is not on writing *per se*, but on life experiences (turning points, places, people, incidents, celebrations, etc.) or life review. It is not for them simply then a matter of putting thoughts into words into writing, even if this were a straightforward linear process, but of using words, lists, jottings, snapshots, objects, or

pictures as triggers, focussers, and clarifiers. With all the ideas and snippets of memories darting about in disarray, writing comes in seemingly as an instrument to order and shape things, but also (as we know) to generate even more ideas. The act of writing becomes a true act of discovery. The incentive is to mine the rich lodes of memories, feelings, and ideas, previously undiscovered to the continuing amazement of the searcher, and the motive becomes a need to freeze the moments in a passage of completed prose or verse. "Completed" is important because some sort of closure is needed in all this searching, and an artefact, a product, is necessary.

But to maintain the electricity image of the notion of induction, the charging of an isolated object by nearby charged objects, it is important that the writing (and idea-searching) be community activities, rather than perpetuation of the stereotype of the isolate and isolated "artist at work." The class as community provides the spurs to share; the eager and always interested audience at all stages of idea-generation and writing, the forum for exemplification of models, forms, and genres, as well as sources of help. There is always something to do, something to watch, someone to talk to while waiting for the words to surface. And success is always guaranteed, because anything written or considered, at any stage, can be produced and discussed seriously.

SUSTAIN

But while for a few people it is enough to get their writing started, for most it is not enough. Writing requires effort--no matter the eventual reward--and there is always the insidious effect of the third law of dynamics: the tendency of a body to remain at rest unless disturbed by an external force. So this "external force" must be an explicit and considered one. No matter how rewarding or exciting the writing has been, there is always the probability of stasis, as even professional and practised writers, with their array of evasion and delaying tactics, know. Writing *is* hard work, and so it is important for the leader to give as much attention to maintaining the writing impetus as to

motivating it. The SUSTAIN phase, therefore, must provide continuing encouragement and success in the production of finished or near-finished artefacts (vignettes, verses, sketches, perhaps as preliminary to stories, memoirs, or even chapters in a family history). But it must also keep at a very high level of awareness the atmosphere, the front and centre-stage importance of the welcoming community of like-minded people, and the intensity of the underlying quest for focussing and fixing the idea or memory on paper. This context, however, needs to be reinforced in very practical ways. The first is a need for a schedule, a time and place for the class so that individuals can arrange their lives around this new intrusive moment in existence, ca*n* see deadlines (of publication dates, or the next class) so that they can arrange their homework and can develop a temporary habit ("Wednesday I go to my lifewriting class"). The second is the need for directed activity so that the push can come when the individual rolls to a stop. But one push is not enough. SUSTAIN means that a continuing series of pushes will be required over the course of the program. Again, the pushes in real terms, must be viewed--despite our personal dedication to the process of writing--as movement towards a product. For this reason, it is well to think of any program in time phases or time modules, a week-end course, a five-week program, or a complete term, but not something that goes on forever without any markers of finished, presented, or published work.

PROPAGATE

We are doing very well if we can get people started, even better if we can sustain them in their endeavours, but we are doing something even more dramatic if we can push the Propagation dimension of our Writing Induction Program. In other words, if we can somehow or other develop ways in which the writing effort or even interest continues beyond the end of the class or course.

We can leave the participants with memories of a pleasurable experience, the stimulation of the discussion, the excitement of writing show-and-tell, the usefulness of collaboration. On a

personal level, we can enable the writers to see the experience as enjoyable, as therapeutic, and beyond that to value the voyage of self-discovery that they have embarked on. At the most rewarding level, we can help them towards the feeling of enlightenment--a feeling that we are finding our way through life.

But on the very practical level, we can apply the "pushes" that will continue movement in writing, and these should be planned as part of writing induction. The PROPAGATE motive can be accomplished by building in follow-up activities and resources, such as a later get-together for readings, a publication to gather new stories, a class reunion. Certainly there should be an exploration near the end of the course of the question "Where do we go from here?" with the opportunity for the students to contribute their ideas for continuation.

To be realistic is to recognize, however, that many of the students will not write again until a powerful occasion arises. For some, there might be the stimulus of another class; but the danger here is that it is not enough simply to repeat the writing experiences, but to present a new challenge, keeping in mind that the START, SUSTAIN, PROPAGATE approach will still be a necessary condition.

CONCLUSION

In the end, perhaps, we have to recognize that however successful we are, it is not a normal procedure for most people to sit down to write life stories or create literature. We are doing well if we have helped those who needed direction to get going on their own and if we have caught a few more along the way. For the others, we can give them gifts that they can take away to use, as long as we are not overly ambitious and if we can maintain our stance of writing inductors. We can show our students the continuing, lifelong benefits of writing by showing them how to use writing to solve problems, through, for instance, list-making, constructing a worry grid, problem

definition, goal formulation and life-planning. In other words, we can engender and foster the feeling that is normal, natural, and not difficult to take pen in hand to clarify and organize ideas. This may be a long way from the five-paragraph essay, but it is a huge step towards literacy.

Our collections of stories illustrate very well the great variety of writing forms and life themes that are available to lifewriters. In spite of their great diversity in subject matter or style, all of our stories find their roots in the life experiences of their authors, and we can see the process here of lifewriters coming to terms with their past, integrating these experiences into the patterns of their lives, more able then to understand the forces that have brought them to where they are today. Above all, these stories are a testament to what Philippe Lejeune called *le pacte autobiographique*, the expectation that autobiography will be true to the writer's perception of reality. Whatever the form of their pieces, whether they take the shape of a memoir, a poem, or a short story, they all have the ring of truth, and are indeed evidence of these lifewriters' search for the truth, value, and meaning of their life experiences.